



NOAA, NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE, WEATHER FORECAST OFFICE

Miami, Florida 33165



Heavy Frost in Glades County on January 22, 2009 (photo by Angie Snow, Glades County Emergency Management)

Friday January 29th: Temperature Extremes and Wildfire Awareness Day

Although a mild and sunny climate is south Florida's greatest natural asset, extremes of heat and cold can and do occur from time to time. These extremes can be harmful and even fatal if people do not take precautions. The heat and humidity of summer can combine to cause temperatures to feel more like 105 degrees on some days, which present a significant health risk even to those used to warm weather. Heat index values rarely reach 110 degrees in south Florida, but when they do, life threatening heat stroke is possible. On these hot days, make sure to drink plenty of water and stay indoors if possible.

Although you can't feel it or see it, ultraviolet radiation can cause damage to the skin and eyes, even on seemingly cloudy days or in shady areas. Ultraviolet radiation, or simply UV radiation, is strong most of the year in subtropical latitudes such as south Florida. The peak hours of UV radiation are normally between 10 am and 2 pm when a high sun angle allows much of the energy to penetrate to the surface. The body's quick response to excessive UV radiation causes sunburn, which can happen in only a matter of minutes. Prolonged or excessive exposure has been proven to cause potentially fatal skin cancer or cataracts, a form of blindness. About 90 percent of all skin cancer cases are linked to UV radiation. Put on sunblock, especially on children, when planning to be outdoors for a prolonged period of time.

In an area known for its mild winters, it's hard to imagine life threatening cold, but freezing temperatures do occur over at least parts of south Florida on a yearly basis. Recent cold snaps can attest to this. In 2009, freezing temperatures occurred over large parts of south Florida on January 22 and February 5, and the recent historic cold snap earlier this month was the longest significant cold snap in recent memory. A total of three people died from hypothermia in south Florida from these episodes. Freezing temperatures also have a significant impact on south Florida's large agricultural industry. The combination of the freezes of 2009 and the freeze of earlier this month will likely lead to hundreds of millions of dollars in damage to crops.

Products such as freeze watches and warnings, and wind chill watches, warnings and advisories alert the public to the threat of potentially life threatening cold temperatures.

During cold events, be extremely careful when using heating devices as deaths often occur as a result of faulty equipment or from improper use. Never use candles or cooking grills indoors, and be very careful with space heaters. Check your heating equipment at least once a year to make sure it is in proper working conditions. Check on the elderly to make sure they have adequate heating. Protect pets and plants during significant cold episodes.

The threat of wildfires is pronounced during the spring months from March through May when the dry season coincides with increasing sun angle and warmer temperatures. Occasional thunderstorms during this period often spark wildfires. In April 2009, a lightning strike sparked a large wildfire in the Big Cypress Preserve of Collier County, burning over 30,000 acres in about 2 weeks.

When conditions are conducive for the rapid spread of wildfires, the national weather service issues fire weather watches and red flag warnings which indicate the location and time of the greatest threat.

Many south Florida wildfires are the result of human activities. Be careful when discarding cigarettes and matches and don't park vehicle in high grass where a hot catalytic converter or tailpipe can start a fire.

Information regarding extreme temperatures and weather conditions conducive to the spreading of wildfires can be obtained by visiting the National Weather Service Miami Forecast Office website at www.weather.gov/southFlorida and clicking on the current hazards for South Florida link.